First Opinion: The Lunar-Centric World of *You Have Seven Messages*

Lewis, Stewart. *You Have Seven Messages*. New York: Delacorte, 2011.

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Malia "Luna" Clover (called "Moon" by her father) is dealing with the death of her mother. A year before the novel's action begins, Luna's mother Marion, a fashion model and author of a bestselling industry "tell all," was hit by a car, devastating Luna, her brother Tile, and their father, renowned filmmaker Jules Clover. Cleaning up her mother's studio a year after the accident, Luna finds on her mother's computer a diary-esque series of letters written "for" Luna, a cufflink, and her mother's phone—the service on which had never been cancelled—with seven messages waiting. Luna works her way through the messages and the letters during the beginning portion of the novel, discovering her parents' ostensibly perfect marriage was deeply troubled; her mother had an affair and her father has hidden the fact that he was there when the cab struck his wife. Luna's search for the essence of truth, however, introduces her to a model/big sister figure, Daria; brings her closer to the boy across the street, a talented cellist named Oliver; helps her deepen her photography and artistic identity; and, particularly through her experiences in Italy, introduces her to other possibilities for living a life in which she is true to herself and honest in her relationships.

You Have Seven Messages seeks to inhabit a strange middle ground between the engaging, open, and character-driven novels of Sarah Dessen, and the staggeringly posh world of *Gossip Girl* (although Luna does live on the Upper *West*, not the Upper East Side of Manhattan). As such, the story is at times difficult to engage with. Though Lewis works to humanize the privileged and famous, to show that they wrestle more often with human, rather than "star," problems, and to illustrate the ways in which even those exasperating experiences unique to the rich and famous might be more painful than we realize—showing how tabloid lies about her father's having had an affair made life difficult for a much younger Luna, or how models are treated as props, not people. While there are times that I empathized with or felt concern for Luna, many elements of privilege are almost unbelievably extraordinary—for instance, she happens to meet Daria, a model whose own mother died when Daria was young. Daria becomes Luna's big sister, organizing a high profile showing of Luna's photographs, the result of which is an article in the *New York Times* that just happens to catch the eye of Annie Leibovitz. While Luna acknowledges that she was "…not so delusional to think any of this would be happening if [she] *weren't* the daughter of Jules Clover," she also acknowledges her privilege, "what am I supposed to do, turn away from opportunities of a lifetime?" (206). There is no concerted effort to recognize that these are extraordinary experiences, uncommon for even the most gifted artist, or to clearly represent, as counterpoint, the struggles of the average artist. Additionally, Luna travels to visit her uncle and his boyfriend's in Italy, in order to clear her head and to deal with the loss of both her mother and her idealized image of her mother. This trip helps her to get "perspective," yet this is an opportunity denied most people, teens or adults. Nearly all people have to learn to cope with trauma and loss while facing daily reminders in and around their homes. While a narrative need not be wholly relatable or a realistic depiction of the reader's experiences in order for the story or characters to be meaningful, these and other elements of Luna's privilege were, to me, somewhat alienating—reducing my ability to sympathize with Luna or to be very invested in the story, despite my wish to do so.

Luna is not only privileged within the story world, but also by the narrative itself, particularly in relation to her younger brother, Tile. Though Tile is loved by all the characters, and frequently functions as an insightful figure, he is also puzzlingly denied importance in his parents' lives. For example, while Luna has three names—one "regular" name, a nickname inspired by her first word, and a personalized version of her nickname, shared with just her father—Tile has just the one name, which he received because lying on the tile of their apartment's bathroom was the only thing that helped his mother with her morning sickness. Thus not only is Tile denied the multiple names/identities granted Luna, but, while her (nick)name comes from something personal about her*self*, her first word, his name was inspired by something personal about someone *else*, his mother's

morning sickness. Furthermore, when Luna finds the letters and mother's phone, both important repositories of information, these narrative catalysts are coded as hers—the file containing the letters is named "Luna" and the password to her mother's voicemail is her name. Luna is privileged by Marion; she is the one who deserves the explanation of why Marion is considering leaving, Tile is an afterthought. Luna does love her brother, striving to act for his good, and Lewis, himself, often shows that Tile sees and understands more of the truth than do the other characters. However, in spite of this, one of Marion's letters elevates her daughter at the expense of her son: "He [your father] loves you more than anything and always has. When I told him about what was going on, his first concern was you—not himself, not Tile—you…In all honesty, I will never stop loving your father…or you"; there is no mention of Tile (134-35). Tile serves a useful function, he "cures" the sickness, offering the insights and healing needed by the other characters and by the plot, but he is neither the text's, nor his parents' favorite.

While this novel has some beautiful moments—like the Pont Neuf bridge scene in which Luna honors the flawed, beautiful truth of her mother and lets go of the ideal—it also struggles with over-privileging its protagonist, Luna. This narrative and fictional privilege keeps the reader semi-aware that he or she is reading a book, instead of being swept away in a delightful tangle of emotion and character. The story holds the audience at arm's length, permitting us to see the subject through a lens, rather than bringing us into the picture.

About the Author

Arielle McKee is an American Studies Master's student at Purdue University, with an interest in how magical realism, fantasy, and children's literature function in American culture.